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**Contact: K. Danielle Edwards**  
**615-741-9192 (Office)**  
**615-417-9097 (Cell)**

**Community Awareness and Involvement Key in Preventing Child Abuse**  
**DCS puts emphasis on communities during Child Abuse Prevention Month**

**NASHVILLE, Tenn.** - Did you know that in Tennessee child abuse is more commonly reported than child neglect?

Did you know that between January-June 2004, drug exposure was the second leading allegation of child abuse or neglect for which there was an indicated perpetrator?

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month, a time when child welfare agencies, educators, social workers and communities emphasize their duty and drive to protect and preserve the well-being of children across the nation. The Tennessee Department of Children's Services is committed to engaging the public and increasing community awareness of a problem that leaves far too many children and families physically battered, emotionally bruised and broken and fractured.

"Not only is protecting children everyone's business, it's a community obligation," said Commissioner Viola P. Miller. "When citizens in communities are informed, feel empowered and have a good rapport with neighbors, people are more aware of the signs of child abuse and neglect, and can be more apt to assist when families in trouble need help."

According to data gathered between January-June 2004, the five leading allegations statewide in which there was an indicated perpetrator were, in order, substantial risk of physical injury, drug-exposed child, environmental neglect, sexual abuse and lack of supervision. Physical abuse was sixth, followed by drug-exposed infant, substantial risk of sexual abuse, abandonment, medical maltreatment, educational neglect, psychological harm and nutritional neglect.

Sometimes when families are reported for different types of neglect, they lack the familial or community infrastructure to help support them during challenging times. And sometimes they are not educated on fundamental life skills, such as learning how to maintain a household.

Environmental neglect, when a house is deemed to be unsuitable because of cleanliness and/or maintenance issues, is the third-leading indicated allegation of reported abuse or neglect. In an indicated allegation, a perpetrator is found to have committed the alleged act, as a result of a thorough Child Protective Services investigation.

Sometimes other types of abuse or neglect, such as lack of supervision – when children are left alone unsupervised – or nutritional neglect, when children do not have adequate food to sustain themselves healthily, denote the same lack of family involvement or other means of support.

"There are families in our state that are headed by overworked, under-supported, overburdened and under-educated couples and single parents," said Miller. "Many times, they are scraping by financially, in a survival state, without the benefit of concerned family members or others who are willing to help – volunteering their resources, time or basic human concern. Of course, this does not absolve anyone of his or her parental responsibilities, but these factors can contribute to a cycle of abuse or neglect."

When community members see signs that a family needs help, they can reach out by offering assistance, mentoring to the children and directing them to agencies and organizations that help troubled families. There are many organizations in the state, like Prevent Child Abuse Tennessee, Catholic Charities of Tennessee, Kids on the Block, and others, that seek to empower individuals and families to improve their quality of life, regardless of their ability to pay for services.

"Ultimately, everyone has a duty to report suspected child abuse or neglect, but we should consider getting back to some of our nostalgic, community-guided sensibilities," said Commissioner Miller. "When a community is aware and informed, and communicates, its citizens and the children are better protected and served."

The Tennessee Department of Children's Services was established in 1996 to provide the best possible care for children and youth who are in state custody, or at significant risk of entering custody, and their families. Services provided by DCS include child protective services, foster care, adoption, programs for delinquent youth, probation/aftercare, and treatment and rehabilitation programs for identified youth.